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## Structure and Sin: The Niebuhrian Roots of Waltz's Neorealist Theory of International Politics

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### Abstract

Prominent IR scholar Kenneth Waltz has acknowledged Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr as a major influence. Yet Waltz's neorealist theory of international politics claims to be strictly 'third image' with no room for 'first image' considerations, such as Niebuhr's emphasis on the explanatory role of 'sinful' human nature. This article claims that the significance of Niebuhr's Christian realism for Waltz's neorealism has been profound, much more so than Waltz and IR scholars generally have recognized. Three arguments are developed. First, Waltz's own early attempt to transcend Niebuhrian realism falls short. Second, Waltz's anarchic balance-of-power theory is basically Niebuhrian. Third, Waltz's assumptions about states as egoistic security-seekers can be properly comprehended from Niebuhr's realist theology. As invoking Niebuhr leads to a deeper understanding of Waltz's theory, Niebuhr may be considered the 'father' of modern realism, structural as well as classical.

Keywords: Kenneth Waltz, Reinhold Niebuhr, neorealism, Christian realism, IR

### Article body

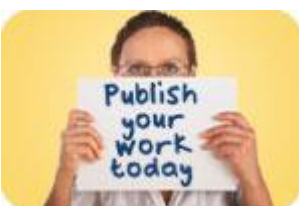
#### Introduction

Kenneth Waltz's still prominent neorealist theory of international politics (Booth 2011) holds that the international system conditions the behavior of states by generating an interstate competition for security that results in a balance of power. Waltz (1979) has deduced this 'structural' theory from three central propositions. First, as no world government exists, the international realm is a system of constant anarchy, albeit one that varies in how capabilities are distributed among its units. Second, the international system's principal units are states, particularly the most capable and powerful ones. Third, states seek to safeguard their survival and so have self-security as their primary goal (cf. Kamminga 2010a: 6). Absent in Waltz's neorealism is a claim about human nature. No such assumption is needed, he insists, as neorealism treats international politics as a distinct domain for the purpose of theorizing and so is strictly 'third image' (cf. Waltz 1959). By contrast, the older, 'first image', 'classical' realism of Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, and E.H. Carr did rely on a - pessimistic - view of human nature in the wake of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism. For Waltz (1995), such 'realist thought' is valuable yet pseudo-theoretical, in contrast to his own 'neorealist theory'.

This article asks how we could understand Waltz's neorealist theory as one that distinguishes itself from earlier realist reflection yet purports to stand in the realist tradition.[1] Undoubtedly, whereas Niebuhr and Morgenthau were unfamiliar with modern social-scientific methodology (Craig 2003: 132-133), Waltz has strengthened IR with a new, Popperian theoretical rigor (cf. Brown 2011: 146; Craig 2003: 120-122). However, one may wonder to what extent Waltz's theory is a realist one, as it seems to lack clear political realist intellectual roots. Waltz considers himself 'a Kantian' (in Halliday and Rosenberg 1998: 379), which suggests a more liberal, idealist or even constructivist outlook (cf. Onuf 2011: 102). Whereas, apart from Niebuhr's influence, the origins of Morgenthau's realism lie in Max Weber and the realist roots of Carr arguably in Thomas Hobbes, typifying Waltz this way may seem impossible indeed (Brown 2011: 153).

I argue, however, that a Niebuhrian reading will make us recognize Waltz as a realist. Thus, my thesis is that Waltz's neorealism cannot be grasped completely without including the essential impact of Niebuhr's Christian realism.[2] It is not just that, as has been argued recently, for Waltz, too, the ultimate causal

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factor in international politics is human nature (Booth 2011; Crawford 2011; cf. Schuett 2010). It is, more specifically, that his neorealism, its theoretical employment of microeconomics notwithstanding, rests on Niebuhr's assumptions about human nature as characterized by sin. If my argument will be correct, Waltz's place in the realist tradition as innovator is secured but at a cost: his attempt in *Man, the State and War* (1959) and especially *Theory of International Politics* (1979) to purge realism from metaphysical, theological groundings has failed. Yet the gain then is that the post-9/11 critique that Waltz's neorealism ignores religion can be rebutted. True, Waltz does not treat religion as an explanatory variable and regards international politics as a domain based on a separation of politics from religion (Snyder 2011). However, he can be said to preserve the very contribution of Niebuhr's theology as against that of social idealists or utopians: to theologically regard politics as an imperfect, necessity-based realm and so to deny it the capacity to realize transcendental values (cf. Guilhot 2010).

Niebuhr's impact on the realist tradition dates from the publication of his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in 1932 (Thompson 1955; Craig 2003). Although Niebuhr's concern with theology and morality drew him occasionally above and beyond national interest and left the systematic study of interest and power to his followers (Thompson 1955: 187), Morgenthau, Kennan - who famously called Niebuhr 'the father of us all' - and Carr have publicly recognized their intellectual debt to him (Haas 1999: 605). But Waltz has explicitly acknowledged Niebuhr's contribution as well. Seven years after *Theory of International Politics* was published, Waltz wrote:

'The influence behind my [anti-hegemonic] preference is partly Immanuel Kant and partly Reinhold Niebuhr. Kant feared that a world government would stifle liberty, become a terrible despotism, and in the end collapse into chaos. Niebuhr drew the conclusion from his dim view of human nature that domestically and internationally the ends of security and decency are served better by balanced than by concentrated power. I distrust hegemonic power, whoever may wield it, because it is so easily misused' (Waltz 1986: 341).

Both Kant and Niebuhr, then, have inspired Waltz (1979: 111-114) to start his neorealist enterprise by rejecting centralized power and celebrating the 'virtues of anarchy'.<sup>[3]</sup> Yet, notwithstanding his Kantian-based critique of inductivism in theory-building (Waltz 1979: 7), Waltz appears most sympathetic to Niebuhr. Note that, for Waltz, 'If there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, balance-of-power theory is it' (1979: 117). Kant, however, 'ridicules the balance of power' for being utterly fragile, as Waltz (1962: 338) himself notes. And in turn, Waltz (1959: 163-165, 182-183; cf. 1962) criticizes Kant's alternative equilibrium - a pacific federation of states - as a 'futile' attempt to try escape the war-proneness of anarchy, as attempting to make states sufficiently perfect to observe a set of laws to which they have voluntarily consented will not work without a political system that allows states to behave ethically.<sup>[4]</sup> By contrast, as Waltz states above, Niebuhr is, like himself, relatively positive about balance of power. Indeed, Niebuhr saw this as the *sine qua non* for achieving at least some justice in a sinful world: 'there has never been a scheme of justice in history which did not have a balance of power at its foundation' (1940: 104).

Significantly, both Waltz and Niebuhr have criticized utopianism, pacifism, and perfectionism in politics. Both have rejected positivism, empiricism, rationalism, abstract moralism, and progressivism in international-political reflection (cf. Guilhot 2010). Both treat international politics as basically different from domestic politics, regarding interstate relations as inevitably more conflictual (cf. Niebuhr 1932: 16, 111; Craig 2003: 36). Moreover, Waltz shares with Niebuhr a German-American Lutheran background (cf. Halliday and Rosenberg 1998: 371).<sup>[5]</sup> Niebuhr was a Lutheran minister and theologian, for whom 'no theologian understood the impossibility of the law of love in a world of sin better than [Luther]' (1948: 172) and who thus came to hold it dangerously utopianist to apply 'love perfectionism from the gospel' to the political order (cf. 1948: 183, 189). And although Waltz calls himself 'a lapsed Lutheran' (quoted in Starobin 2006), it makes sense to suspect that his balance-of-power theory could work the way it does precisely because of a theological grounding in Niebuhr's 'dim view of human nature' (Waltz). It was a sin-based view of 'not so moral man' (1965: 22, cf. 1932) that made Niebuhr oppose the optimistic Marxists and liberals of whom Waltz (1959) later became critical as well.

My case will rest on a threefold argument. First, Waltz's own early attempt to surpass Niebuhr's realism is inconclusive. Second, Waltz's anarchic balance-of-power theory is basically Niebuhr's. Third, Waltz's assumptions regarding states as egoistic security-seekers can be suitably understood from Niebuhr's realist theology.

### **Waltz's inconclusive attempt to transcend Niebuhr's realism**

Waltz believes that appeals to human nature are pointless in IR, because structure shapes international politics much more profoundly than agency does. Thus, he attributes the 'striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia' to the features of the system, the 'enduring anarchic character of

international politics' (Waltz 1979: 66). Nonetheless, my first argument is that Waltz's effort to surpass Niebuhr as a first image thinker is fallacious on its own grounds.

More than for Morgenthau, Waltz had 'developed a special fondness for Niebuhr' as an undergraduate student.[6] And in the 1950s, Waltz started his inquiry of international politics by invoking Niebuhr, of whom he notes with praise:

'Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian who in the last twenty-five years has written as many words of wisdom on problems of international politics as have any of the academic specialists in that subject, has criticized utopians, Liberals and Marxist alike, with frequency and telling effect' (Waltz 1959: 20).

It can be argued that, for Waltz as a critic of human nature optimism (1959: 39-40, 43, 76), Niebuhr is the central first image representative (cf. Kaag and Kreps 2012: 198) - the one to beat as well as to appreciate. As Waltz notes, for Niebuhr, 'Political realism...is impossible without a true insight into man's nature' (1959: 20). Now as Waltz (1959: 21, 32) observes, Niebuhr's Christian realism draws on Augustine's conception of original sin. For Niebuhr (1941: 190-255; 1932), then, we must understand the evil of human sin in terms of self-pride, inequality, sensuality, and collective egotism. Yet, as Waltz (1959: 31-33) also recognizes, Niebuhr was convincingly critical politically of Augustine (and Luther), who saw the dangers of anarchy in the egotism of citizens but overlooked the dangers of tyranny in the ruler's selfishness and thus the need for checks upon the latter's will. Earthly perfection being impossible does not warrant indifference to the relative qualities of alternative political institutions: (balance of power) democracy is more just than totalitarianism (Niebuhr 1954; 1941: 233-234). And although Waltz (1959: 161-186) appoints Spinoza as spokesman for the first image, Spinoza's secular psychological conception of human nature sits uneasily with Waltz's own project. Spinoza sees man's defectiveness - the frequent prevalence of passion over reason in pursuing self-preservation - as an empirical datum without independent explanation (cf. Waltz 1959: 23-24). But Spinoza thereby ultimately accepts the possibility that man progresses far enough (by internal growth or pushed by the state) to be able to let his reason control or calm his passions and end war and the need for balance of power. Waltz, then, could not accept Spinoza's human nature view as the key first image one without jeopardizing his own third image mission. However, for Waltz, this problem would dissolve if he included Niebuhr's neo-Augustinian view, one that entails an ultimately critical explanation of Spinoza's dualistic neglect of sin (cf. Waltz 1959: 24):

'[While believing that] the "Fall" signifies that fact the human reason is unable to control passions completely..., Spinoza...manages to express [modern culture's] confidence in both nature and reason and its slight preference for the latter over the former. He fails to understand...that human egotism is something more than the natural impulse of every organism "to preserve its own existence", [and] that it has a power which defies both nature and reason' (Niebuhr 1941: 122-123).

Yet Jean Bethke Elshtain has a point in noticing that 'Niebuhr hovers over Waltz's text but alights, or is permitted to alight, nowhere' (2010: 44). Indeed, Waltz eventually belittles the worth of Niebuhr's theological thought for international-political theorizing:

'Niebuhr [1940: 4] writes that "political strategies," invariably involving "the balancing of power with power," are made necessary by "the sinful character of man."...[But while h]uman nature may in some sense have been the cause of war in 1914,...by the same token it was the cause of peace in 1910. In the intervening years many things changed, but human nature did not' (Waltz 1959: 28). 'The causes that in fact explain differences in behavior must be sought somewhere other than in human nature itself' (Waltz 1959: 33).

However, Waltz's attempt to bypass Niebuhr's human nature view this way is flawed. What Waltz (1959, 1979) wants is to *theoretically explain* war and other international behavior. While this does not require that explanatory factors are strictly political-institutional, it does require the establishment of 'final' causes of 'general' patterns, not of 'accidental' causes of 'particularities' (Waltz 1959: 231; 1979: 118). Thus, when Waltz (1959) asks 'what are the causes of war?', it means that he wants to know what explains war *per se*, or the likelihood of war *in general*. This being so, Waltz's effort to drive out human nature is confused. The inability of human nature to explain the different particularities of 1910 and 1914 does not disqualify its potential to 'finally' explain war in general. Indeed, in this sense human nature may operate similar to the third image cause of anarchy, of which Waltz (1954: 232) remarks that it cannot explain any given war but is an indirect, 'permissive' cause instead of a 'direct' one. If anarchy is alike during war and during peace and as a general notion cannot account for historical variance, then it is odd to demand of human nature that it could explain particular social events immediately (Waltz 1959: 27-29). In fact, for Niebuhr, human nature must not be treated as directly explaining the 1910 (peace) and 1914 (war) situations, but as an ultimate war cause: while under different circumstances people behave differently, without sinful human nature there would virtually be no war at all.[7]

Insofar as Waltz is willing to adopt Niebuhr's emphasis on human nature, he downplays its distinct role

unduly quickly. He does not dispute that 'Human nature is a cause...in the sense that if men were somehow entirely different, they would not need political control at all' (Waltz 1959: 28-29). And he accepts that 'Human nature may not explain why...in one year there is war and in another comparative peace[, but it] can...explain the necessary imperfections of all social and political forms' (Waltz 1959: 30). However, Waltz then mistakenly takes it for granted that a non-perfect human nature is merely trivial and self-evident. He states: 'Solutions for the problem of war based upon the pattern of either the first or the second image [concerning the internal structure of states] must assume the possibility of perfection in the conflicting units. [However, p]erfection [is] impossible for states as for men' (Waltz 1959: 119). And he claims:

'[W]ithout the imperfections of the separate states there would not be wars, just as it is true that a society of perfectly rational beings, or of perfect Christians, would never know violent conflict. These statements are, unfortunately, as trivial as they are true...: perfectly good states or men will not do bad things' (Waltz 1959: 229).

But Waltz's assertion that human and social anti-perfectionism is 'trivial' and 'true' is wrong, as that is both important and worldview-dependent. Waltz himself observes that pacifists, liberals, and 'revisionist' socialists think otherwise. While liberals tend to stress political reform and revisionists economic and social content for solving the war problem, 'The fundamental assumption is...the same: Each state because it is internally so perfect becomes in its external policy so enlightened that conflicts can scarcely ever exist and can certainly never lead to violence' (Waltz 1959: 155-156). However, this 'fundamental assumption' entails a *conviction* typical of modern secular thinkers, pacifists, and religious humanists. In the terminology of Robert Nelson (1991), we are dealing with representatives of the optimistic 'Roman' tradition in Western intellectual thought that defends the perfectibility of mankind based on reason and enlightened self-interest. According to Nelson, the alternative, more pessimistic 'Protestant' tradition, which has Augustine as its foundational theologian, is skeptical about such a possibility, as men have become too corrupted and sinful to offer a satisfactory foundation for improvement (Nelson 1991: 21, 64-69). Therefore, Waltz's rejection of human perfectionism and his belief that it is necessary to include the third image of international anarchy is not self-evident at all, but 'Protestant' instead of 'Roman'. And given the analysis so far, it is natural to think that the Protestant Niebuhr's 'useful' and 'valuable warning' of 'do not expect too much' from the application of reason to politics (Waltz 1959: 40, 33) has constant impact on Waltz's analysis. Indeed, Waltz's own fight against 'expecting too much' is what makes him emphasize the third image of anarchy in a way that reflects Niebuhr's anti-utopianism as rooted in a denial of perfectionism:

'According to the third image, there is a constant possibility of war in a world in which there are two or more states each seeking to promote a set of interests and having no agency above them upon which they can rely for protection. But many liberals and socialist revisionists deny, or at least minimize, the possibility that wars would occur in a world of political or social democracies. An understanding of the third image makes it clear that the expectation would be justified only if the minimum interest of states in preserving themselves became the maximum interest of all of them - and each could rely fully upon the steadfast adherence to this definition by all of the others. Stating the condition makes apparent the utopian quality of liberal and socialist expectations. The criticism could be extended by questioning as well their interpretations of the first image' (Waltz 1959: 227).

Here Waltz seems to be employing Niebuhrian insights without acknowledging it. Suspicious as he was of liberal and Marxist perfectionism, Niebuhr had criticized the liberal and socialist reliance on (what Waltz calls) the 'second image'. Thus, he argued, the League of Nations was a miserable failure, and a world of socialist states would probably prove no less conflictual, as communist governments (he foresaw) would, for their own glorification, appeal to national identity and patriotism, not transnational solidarity (Niebuhr 1932: 90, 96; see Craig 2003: 36).

One might object that Waltz's conclusion about the first image does much to minimize the need for a Niebuhrian human nature assumption. Thus, he writes:

'The assumption of a fixed human nature, in terms of which all else must be understood, itself helps to shift attention away from human nature - because human nature, by the terms of the assumption, cannot be changed, whereas social-political institutions can be' (Waltz 1959: 41, emphasis in original).

Yet Waltz also believes that the political institution of international anarchy cannot, or should not, be (basically) changed. He treats international anarchy as invariant but also acknowledges that changing anarchy into world government, if ever possible, would not eliminate all wars, as there would be civil wars (Waltz 1959: 228). The question then becomes why there is no world government, especially if needed for curing world problems, and why would it be so dangerous if it did exist. Possibly, this is because, as Waltz himself contends, we cannot trust others (1959: 168, cf. 238; 1979: 103) and that decision-makers are fearful calculators who seek to promote a narrowly defined self-interest (1979: 117, 118; 1986: 331; see Crawford 2011: 160-163). Thus, Neta Crawford may well be right to think that 'human nature, for Waltz,

determines world politics as much or more than the anarchic structure of world politics' (2011: 160). If so, the human nature in question is to be Niebuhrian.

As Waltz's early treatment of Niebuhr is inconclusive in itself - Niebuhr remains influentially present in the background - there is every reason to look more closely at his later neorealist theory from a Niebuhrian perspective.

### **Balance of power under anarchy**

Waltz summarizes his neorealist theory by stating: 'Balance-of-power politics prevail wherever two, and only two, requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive' (1979: 121). Again, Waltz shares Niebuhr's preference for balanced power as opposed to centralized power in politics. Importantly, Waltz (1979: 174; 1986: 329; 1997: 915) has not turned into a structural determinist who believes that the international system explains all; his point is that the system has significant causal effect. Thus, Waltz's eventual position leaves room for unit-level explanations and even invites us to ask why structure works the strong way it does. From a Niebuhrian perspective, the answer would be theological: a non-perfect, sinful human nature entails the metaphysical framework within which, subsequently, neorealist theory may become a sensible attempt to explain the international institutional 'shift away' from human nature. Questioning Waltz's second requirement of units wishing to survive in the next section and taking it as given in the present one, I argue, secondly, that Waltz's balance-of-power theory as requiring anarchy is fundamentally Niebuhrian.

For Waltz, striving for international hierarchy would be costly and dangerous:

'In hierarchic orders,...[s]ubstantive issues become entwined with efforts to influence or control the controllers. The hierarchic ordering of politics adds one to the already numerous objects of struggle, and the object added is at a new order of magnitude...As hierarchical systems, governments nationally or globally are disrupted by the defection of major parts. In a society of states with little coherence, attempts at world government would founder on the ability of an emerging central authority to mobilize the resources needed to create and maintain the unity of the system by regulating and managing its parts. The prospect of world government would be an invitation to prepare for world civil war' (Waltz 1979: 111-112).

Anarchy, for Waltz, is preferable in our non-utopian world and so entails the firm starting-point for international theorizing. Yet its drawbacks are serious. Invoking a microeconomic analogy, Waltz (1979: 105, 115-116) regards international cooperation as strongly constrained. Thus, first, international structures limit the cooperation of states rather similar to how oligopolistic markets limit the cooperation of firms. Units in both such 'self-help' systems will be concerned about their survival and behave accordingly. And second, cooperation in international structures is even less probable or sustainable than in oligopolistic markets. In the first case units act under anarchy, whereas in the second units operate within government-decreed rules. International anarchy makes that states must prepare for their physical defense (cf. Kamminga 2010b).

However, what makes Waltz believe that the international coherence needed to create an ideal hierarchy is absent and states under anarchy cannot rely on each other? After all, (neo)liberal theorists tend to be more optimistic in this regard. Here Waltz seems to continue his implicit reliance on Niebuhr (for the remainder of this paragraph, cf. Amstutz 2008: 120, 129; Kamminga 2011). Niebuhr saw world government as illusory, because the shared standards necessary for effective international institutions were lacking. Even if world government were desirable, it would be unattainable: governments are not created by constitutional fiat, and, more seriously, have only limited efficacy in integrating a community rooted in 'organic' factors such as a common history (joint struggles against a common enemy), language, culture or religion. Also, the shared convictions on issues of justice that political cohesion requires are lacking globally (Niebuhr 1954: 24-38, 119, cf. 1952: 136, 1959: 266, 277). Crucially, Niebuhr's pessimism about improving the human condition globally resulted from his observation that sin has even more harmful effects in the anarchic international environment than in domestic society. Because of the universality of sin, political decisions and actions inevitably include partiality and self-interest. Since sin distorts all human enterprises, managing the future is impossible, and all political action immodestly directed at grandiose projects is bound to fail (Niebuhr 1952: 72; 1959: 287-299). Waltz's anarchy preference and remaining pessimism are comprehensible precisely because of these Niebuhrian notions.

Given anarchy, balance-of-power theory is the hallmark of Waltz's approach. Now neorealism does not claim to explain a continuous presence of balance of power, like how microeconomic theory does not envisage a system to be in equilibrium normally. 'Economic theory expects strong and persistent tendencies, rather than particular states or conditions. Similarly, [neorealism holds] that international-political systems tend strongly *toward* balance but are seldom *in* balance' (Waltz 1997: 914-915, emphases in original). Even if it were empirically true that states seek ever more power instead of regarding power as

a means and survival as a goal, and bandwagoning (weaker states joining a strong power) is more common than balancing, neorealist theory would not fail, Waltz (1997: 915; cf. 1979: 116-123, 126) insists, as it represents a unique research paradigm.

However, if indeed Waltz allows bandwagoning to factually occur more often than balancing, it is natural to ask why he holds on to his specific research paradigm. One might think that Waltz holds on to his theory 'religiously': by 'moving the goalposts' (cf. Guzzini 1998: 126) in cases of counter-evidence. But we should recall Waltz's distrust of hegemonic power, no matter who employs it, as that, he thinks, is so easily abused. For Waltz, then, balanced power is preferable to even a 'benevolent' dominant power:

'In the light of structural theory, unipolarity appears as the least stable of international configurations. Unlikely though it is, a dominant power may behave with moderation, restraint, and forbearance. Even if it does, however, weaker states will worry about its future behavior. America's founding fathers warned against the perils of power in the absence of checks and balances. Is unbalanced power less of a danger in international than in national politics?...Unbalanced power, whoever wields it, is a potential danger to others. The powerful state may, and the United States does, think of itself as acting for the sake of peace, justice, and well-being in the world. These terms, however, will be defined to the liking of the powerful, which may conflict with the preferences and interests of others. The powerful state will at times act in ways that appear arbitrary and high handed to others, who will smart under the unfair treatment they believe they are receiving' (Waltz 1997: 915-916). 'Ideally, a benevolent despot is able to fashion the wise policies that the compromises of democracy impede. Similarly, imperial countries, superior to those they rule, may claim to aim at uplifting the natives but seldom produce that result. Disparity of power spawns despotic rule at home and abroad. Through the long years of the Cold War the might of each superpower balanced the might of the other and moderated the behavior of both of them...The disappearance of... balance unleashed the impulses of the remaining great power. Superiority fosters the desire to use it' (Waltz 2004: 4-5).

Again, Waltz's analysis about the typical instability of unipolarity begs important questions. Why is it so unlikely that a benevolent power acts with restraint? Why should weaker states fear a great power that aims to be benevolent and even acts as such? Why should we prefer an international politics of checks and balances if a benevolent despot could do more good ideally (cf. Etzioni 2004)? Why would superiority promote the desire to use power? Apparently, Waltz tacitly rejects more liberal perspectives because of a typically Niebuhrian suspicion of the motives and methods of great powers as potential international stabilizers (Niebuhr 1940; cf. Kaag and Kreps 2012: 198), fear of American imperialism, and defense of both domestic democracy and international balance of power in terms of checks and balances. For Niebuhr (1944), not an enthusiastic liberalism but a cautious yet hopeful Christian anthropology should ground democratic government (Amstutz 2008: 135; cf. Kamminga 2011). And he warned Americans for the conviction that their values and ideas are universal and their nation serves providentially assigned purposes (Bacevich 2008: 7). If, because of man's sin, people of both good and malign intent invariably take advantage of those in weaker positions, the obvious solution is to minimize power disparities among both individuals and groups. Thus, Niebuhr wrote: 'All political justice is achieved by coercing the anarchy of collective self-interest into some kind of decent order by the most attainable balance of power' (1940: 104). For Waltz as well as for Niebuhr, without such power equilibrium the needs of weaker parties are unlikely to be addressed. In Niebuhr's explanation, they will not be so because the finitude of man prevents him from understanding the needs of his neighbor as well as his own, and even more importantly, because the sin of man impels him to prefer, both consciously and unconsciously, the fulfillment of his own interests more than those of his neighbors (see Haas 1999: 617-618). Thus, Niebuhr argued that international order requires the maintenance of interstate balance of power because of the universal impact of sin (Amstutz 2008: 120). Ultimately, Waltz's balanced power preference relies on such Niebuhrian insights that rest on a Christian, 'dim view of human nature' (Waltz): 'the facts about human nature which make a monopoly of power dangerous and a balance of power desirable are understood in neither [classical economic theory nor Marxist secular] theory but are understood from the standpoint of the Christian faith' (Niebuhr 1954: 99).

Thus, as regards his neorealist theory of balance of power, Waltz settles for this second best solution - no 'ideal' world government (needed for true progress) but a 'real' balance of power - ultimately because of a Niebuhrian non-perfectionist view of human nature (to be spelled out more deeply in the next section). In Waltz's theory, it is the latter that makes an ideal world government undesirable as well as infeasible and a benevolent hegemon undesirable at least.

### **States as egoistic security-seekers**

Waltz regards the anarchic international domain as being populated by units who wish to survive. Like any structural theory, Waltz's neorealism must make assumptions about what motivates its major units. It makes two: (i) states are concerned first and foremost with security, since the pursuit of other goals only

makes sense once survival is assured; (ii) states are egoistic or self-regarding (Waltz 1979: 126, 91; cf. Wendt 1999: 99-100). Third, then, I argue that Waltz's assumptions about states as egoistic security-seekers can be properly understood from Niebuhr's realist theology.

Waltz (1979: 93-95, 131-134) argues empirically as well as deductively - by analogy with microeconomic theory - why states, especially the stronger ones, are to be taken as the system's major units. First, states have long been the major international actors and so define the international structure. Second, the international structure resembles a situation of oligopoly rather than perfect competition, as it is dominated by a limited number of states rather than many roughly equal states. Third, practically, states set the scene in which all actors, multinationals included, must operate, the terms of the relations between them and non-state actors, and even the rules other actors have to accept. As even weak states have often been able to hold international corporations under control, non-state actors do not appear to develop to the point of challenging the great powers. Fourth, while many firms perish, states die rarely (cf. Kamminga 2010b).

Waltz (1979: 91-92, 98, cf. 118, 133-134, 1997: 915) defends the state security egoism assumptions along these lines. First, a micro-theory, economic or international-political, assumes, rather than realistically describes, the motivation of actors. To assume that states aim to safeguard their survival - and thus need, first and foremost, to have their security ascertained - is to make a major simplification for enabling theory construction. Second, this assumption is useful, as it is possible to build a theory based on it that may generate new and important insights. Third, this assumption is sensible, because survival is a prerequisite for realizing any goals that states may have, particularly in a world where the security of states is uncertain. Fourth, states are self-regarding about their security, because under self-help conditions they cannot depend for this on other states (cf. Kamminga 2010b). Importantly, states operate as 'like units' in this sense (Waltz 1979: 93).

However, Waltz's defense is inconclusive. First, he relies heavily on empirical analysis for selecting states as the main actors, which makes for a rather insecure foundation. Second, his argument for assuming states to seek survival as simple, useful, and reasonable is rather circular. Stating that this assumption serves the purpose of good theory-building under anarchy entails no sufficiently independent defense. Third, the economic analogy appears not to hold adequately. Waltz suggests that states are like rational firms in economic theory, yet - unlike most modern realists and many (neo)liberals - harbors reservations about the rationality assumption. He insists that '[balance-of-power] theory requires no assumptions of rationality...on the part of all the actors', instead stressing the role of 'fear' of failing to prosper, laying oneself open to dangers, suffering (Waltz 1979: 118).[8] Fourth, as Alexander Wendt (1999: 105, 103) argues, Waltz does not clarify that his conclusions about the effects of anarchy and power distribution also *depend* on his motivational assumptions: the explanatory work is not done completely by the structural factors.

What, then, makes Waltz believe that (capable) states are the major actors and generally operate as egoistic security-seekers? Again, Niebuhr's Christian realism seems to underpin Waltz's position. As we shall see, the empirical reliance problem involved in the choice for states can be reduced by recognizing the theological, sin-based inheritance; and also the circularity embedded in the security egoism assumption can be removed by including the concept of original sin. Thus, I argue that Waltz's neorealism assumes that states, whatever their ideological or cultural make-up, are like egoistic collectivities in the sense of Niebuhr, protecting 'immoral societies' based on national egoism and fear for security resulting from a 'not so moral man' human nature. Neorealism modifies the microeconomic analogy by implicitly accepting a Niebuhrian distinction between the economic or profit motive as the key to the mystery of human incentives and other motives such as those for security and power (Niebuhr 1954: 87). While motivational assumptions are variable (Wendt 1999: 104-107), Waltz's rejection of the more altruistic assumptions constructivists are willing to include arguably goes back to Niebuhr.

Niebuhr insisted that a realistic theory must include groups - notably states - as distinguishable from, albeit ultimately reducible to, sinful individual humans. Individuals can be unselfish, but groups (states) cannot; they effectively magnify individuals' egoistic urges:

'In every human group there is less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others, therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals, who compose the group, reveal in their personal relationships' (Niebuhr 1932: xi). '[G]roup pride is...merely an aspect of the pride and arrogance of individuals [yet] achieves a certain authority over the individual... [F]urthermore,...the pretensions and claims of a collective...self exceed those of the individual ego. The group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centred and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual...[Group] egotism...is most consistently expressed by the national state, because the state gives the collective impulses of the nation such instruments of power, and presents the imagination of individuals with such obvious symbols of its discrete collective identity, that the national state is most able to make absolute claims for itself, to enforce those claims by power and to give them



plausibility and credibility by the majesty and panoply of its apparatus...Sinful pride and idolatrous pretension are...an inevitable concomitant of the cohesion of large political groups' (Niebuhr 1941: 221-223).

Niebuhr's understanding of collective egoism takes the national interest as realistic albeit ethically dubious. Niebuhr (1932: 48), then, saw the nation as the ultimate community of loyalty - as smaller units lack the size and larger units the concreteness and durability to command man's highest loyalty - although he resisted national glorification. This universal view of the nation as the pre-eminent selfish community (Niebuhr 1932: 88) is grounded in the Christian conception of sin: 'Collective pride[: the] very essence of human sin is in it...[C]ollective egotism and group pride are a more pregnant source of injustice and conflict than purely individual pride' (Niebuhr 1941: 226). Niebuhr adds that (Christian) love cannot cure sin in an environment of collectivities (cf. Waltz 1959: 26):

'Only a forgiving love, grounded in repentance, is adequate to heal the animosities between nations. But that degree of love is an impossibility for nations. It is a very rare achievement among individuals; and the mind and heart of collective man is notoriously less imaginative than that of the individual' (Niebuhr 1948: 139; cf. 1954: 127-130).

Furthermore, Waltz's doubts about rationality or altruism as typical of the motivation of (powerful) states reflect Niebuhr's critique of utopians:

'The moralists...who imagine that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill[, fail] to recognize those elements in man's collective behavior which belong to the order of nature and can never be brought completely under the dominion of reason or conscience' (Niebuhr 1932: xii). '[Utopians] do not see that the limitations of the human imagination, the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of irrational egoism, particularly in group behavior, make social conflict an inevitability in human history, probably to its very end' (Niebuhr 1932: xx). 'The relations between groups...will be determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by any rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group' (Niebuhr 1932: xxiii).

Thus, Waltz's theoretical journey toward the third image includes the belief that states are dominant and like units because of a hidden Niebuhrian foundation: as the strongest collectivities, states are similarly egoist and self-serving (Craig 2003: 35), thus insecure, and therefore strive for survival instinctively (Niebuhr 1932: 18). 'The theory makes assumptions about the interests and motives of states, rather than explaining them', Waltz (1979: 112) says rather conveniently. But it is Niebuhrian theology that finally completes the 'usefulness' and 'sensible' of these assumptions by offering the required independent justification. Most importantly, Niebuhr explains why, for Waltz, states are the strongest form of egoistic groups with the impulse to self-preservation under anarchy. The demand of religious moralists that nations obey 'the law of Christ' is unrealistic and the hope that they will do so sentimental (Niebuhr 1932: 75). This is where Waltz's domain of international politics really begins: by assuming 'immoral' states.

Next, Niebuhr explains that below these immoral states there is 'not so moral' man. Even the morality of those individuals possessing the highest degree of Christian goodwill is normally limited to the egoistic nation-state and so non-cosmopolitan in scope, as pure transnational benevolence is impossible in a sinful world. Even a nation composed of individuals with the highest degree of religious goodwill would be less than loving in its relation to other nations, if only because the individuals could not think themselves into the position of the individuals of another nation in a degree sufficient to insure pure benevolence. Furthermore, the goodwill they did possess would be channeled into loyalty to their own nation and strengthen that nation's selfishness (Niebuhr 1932: 75). Consequently, Niebuhr argues:

'The unqualified character of [loyalty to the nation] is the very basis of the nation's power and of the freedom to use the power without moral restraint. Thus the unselfishness of individuals makes for the selfishness of nations...Altruistic passion is sluiced into the reservoirs of nationalism with great ease, and is made to flow beyond them with great difficulty. What lies beyond the nation, the community of mankind, is too vague to inspire devotion' (Niebuhr 1932: 91). '[T]he nation is at one and the same time a check upon, and a final vent for, the expression of individual egoism...A combination of unselfishness and vicarious selfishness in the individual thus gives a tremendous force to national egoism, which neither religious nor rational idealism can ever completely check' (Niebuhr 1932: 93-94).

When, then, Niebuhr writes that 'The selfishness of nations is proverbial' and 'an inevitability' (1932: 84, 272), this is to be explained by the limits as well as the possibilities of human benevolence. While the national self is more than the sum of its individual selves, sinful human nature is the ultimate key (cf. Niebuhr 1932: 88). Waltz's neorealist world aims to be realistic because of Niebuhrian individual as well as collective factors. Indeed, Waltz's claim that state security egoism is to stay relies on a factor deeper than mere anarchy: 'the ultimate sources of social conflicts and injustices are to be found in the ignorance and

selfishness of men' (Niebuhr 1932: 23), and 'The will-to-power of competing national groups is the cause of the international anarchy which the moral sense of mankind has thus far vainly striven to overcome' (1932: 18-19). In adopting egoistic assumptions instead of more altruistic ones (cf. Wendt 1999), such is what Waltz presupposes about his units.

### Conclusion

Politically, Waltz's neorealist theory locates the primary causes of war and balance of power at the third image level of international anarchy. Yet Waltz's anarchy problem is embedded in a first image Niebuhrian view of the sinful nature of man, which expresses itself most forcefully in state-level collectivities where it cannot (even) be healed by love as the ultimate Christian command and norm. Whereas Waltz insists that theory is to be built 'creatively' from a 'brilliant intuition' or 'creative idea' (1979: 9), and so is 'artifice' (1995: 68), the doctrine of original sin entails the foundational 'creative' assumption for his neorealism to work. 'Original sin' cannot claim conclusive proof - although Niebuhr (cf. 1965: 24) suggested strong empirical evidence for this 'obvious fact' (1952: 17) - but it should be no problem for Waltz to 'see' a sin-constituted human nature without being able to prove its existence. Presuming its presence gives him the ultimate explanation of international-political action (cf. Hollis and Smith 1990: 207). That is roughly how Niebuhr himself used this Christian doctrine that was univocally rejected by practically all different schools of modern culture (Niebuhr 1952: 17). Thus, Waltz's (1979) 'creative' application of neoclassical firm theory to international politics is arguably filtered through Niebuhr's 'creative' use of the Christian sin concept.

That the pessimistic outlook of Waltz's neorealism ultimately rests on a Niebuhrian, 'Protestant' human nature view explains why his employment of neoclassical (liberal) economic theory has not led to a more optimistic, more (neo)liberal theory of international politics (cf. Kaag and Kreps 2012: 198-199). Arguably, modern, Enlightenment-based neoclassical economic thought has its roots in Nelson's 'Roman' tradition, particularly because of its notion of universal harmony (welfare or common good) from the forces of self-interest through Adam Smith's hidden hand (Nelson 1991). By contrast, for Niebuhr (1954: 114-139), the ultimate cause of humanity's problems is not mere egoism, but, as Augustine taught, the universal and permanent presence of original sin. Accordingly, neorealism highlights balance of power, not harmony. In constructivist terms, Waltz's 'logic of anarchy' represents a 'Niebuhrian culture', rather than, as Wendt (1999: 284-285) believes, a 'Lockean culture'. After all, the latter 'culture' is broadly Roman rather than Protestant because of the Lockean emphasis on rationalism, optimism, and progressivism, without seeing reason as corrupted and undermined by the sinful state of mankind (John Locke's own Protestant, Puritan upbringing notwithstanding; Nelson 1991: 20, 31, 90-95, 123, 131, 194).

With Waltz having never abandoned Niebuhr truly, the traditional textbook divide between classical realism and neorealism is smaller than normally assumed: a human nature assumption remains crucial. Indeed, religion has never left modern IR entirely, as Niebuhr provides the theological key to neorealism as its dominant theory. In economics, the optimistic, rationalistic, Roman tradition has been much more influential than the pessimistic, skeptical, Protestant one (Nelson 1991). By contrast, Waltz's appeal to microeconomic theory notwithstanding, with the domination of (neo)realism and Niebuhr as the 'father' of modern realism, in IR the Protestant tradition has been most influential. The argumentative structure of Waltz's neorealism is microeconomic, but its political substance is basically Niebuhrian. This article, then, has confirmed a Niebuhrian insight denied by Waltz: 'an understanding of political phenomena, whether international or domestic, is inseparable from a clear picture of human nature' (Thompson 1955: 172).

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## Notes

[1] My thanks to Simon Polinder for his helpful comments.

[2] Like Waltz, I leave aside the later Niebuhr who during the 1950s softened his realism by morally defending U.S. statecraft beyond national egoism (cf. Niebuhr 1952, 1958; Bacevich 2008) and by - vaguely and uneasily - considering a world state because of the thermonuclear threat (see Craig 2003; Niebuhr 1959). Also, I shall not discuss Niebuhr's occasionally specific, easily reversible political judgments, of which Waltz (1959: 31-32) is rightly critical.

[3] Robert Schuett (2010) has offered a remarkable Freudian-psychological reconstruction of the human nature assumptions underlying both classical realism and post-classical realism, notably the structural realist theories of Waltz and John Mearsheimer. Of course, I agree with Schuett that Waltz's neorealism is deeply infused with human nature assumptions, and also that Waltz should not be seen as an Augustinian or Niebuhrian without extensive analysis (cf. Schuett 2010: 8). Yet I would argue that Schuett's argument for Waltz's - conscious or unconscious - employment of Freud is much more speculative than my argument for the Niebuhrian nature of Waltz's neorealism. Thus, first, Waltz has never explicitly acknowledged Freud as a major influence - in contrast to Niebuhr - and, as Schuett (2010: 69) concedes, has rarely cited the latter. Second, Schuett (2010: 69-72) himself states that a more direct and deep intellectual relationship between Freud and Waltz cannot be established, rather than some occasional 'points of contact'. On the other hand, it is worthwhile to note that, by invoking Freud (who preached a deep human alienation), Schuett, like the present author, appears inclined to place Waltz in the 'Protestant' tradition within Western intellectual thought (see Nelson 1991: 21, 49, 150-161 and the text below).

[4] A Kantian reading of Waltz's neorealism may suggest deep similarities between Kant and Waltz's views on the nature of systemic approaches to the field but also reveal the critically different conclusions they reach about the nature of the international system (Harrison 2002).

[5] Kant's background was German Lutheran.

[6] Waltz said this during the close of the 2008 Waltz Conference at Aberystwyth University. See <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/news-and-events/videocasts/waltzconference2008>.

[7] Waltz (1959: 231-232) also tends to blur the distinction between 'irrationalities in men' (note the use of the plural) as 'accidental' or 'immediate' war causes within the first image and human nature as a general first image cause. By suddenly dealing with the latter in terms of the former, he lets the potentially independent contribution of human nature disappear by a sleight of hand. But it can be simultaneously true that some accidental irrationality is the cause of a particular war and that human nature is a fundamental cause of war in general - perhaps one that, as Niebuhr would hold, underpins not only accidental causes but even the permissive cause of the state of anarchy attached to a nation-state system.

[8] 'I don't like the word rationality, I'll admit it', Waltz said at the 2008 Aberystwyth conference (note 6). See also Mearsheimer (2009: 241), who as a neorealist castigates Waltz for rejecting the rational actor assumption.

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